



Rusting relics of a bygone era

Wilson, P. (2021, May 1). Rusting relics of a bygone era. Portrush Heritage Group: Heritage Newsletter.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/05/2021

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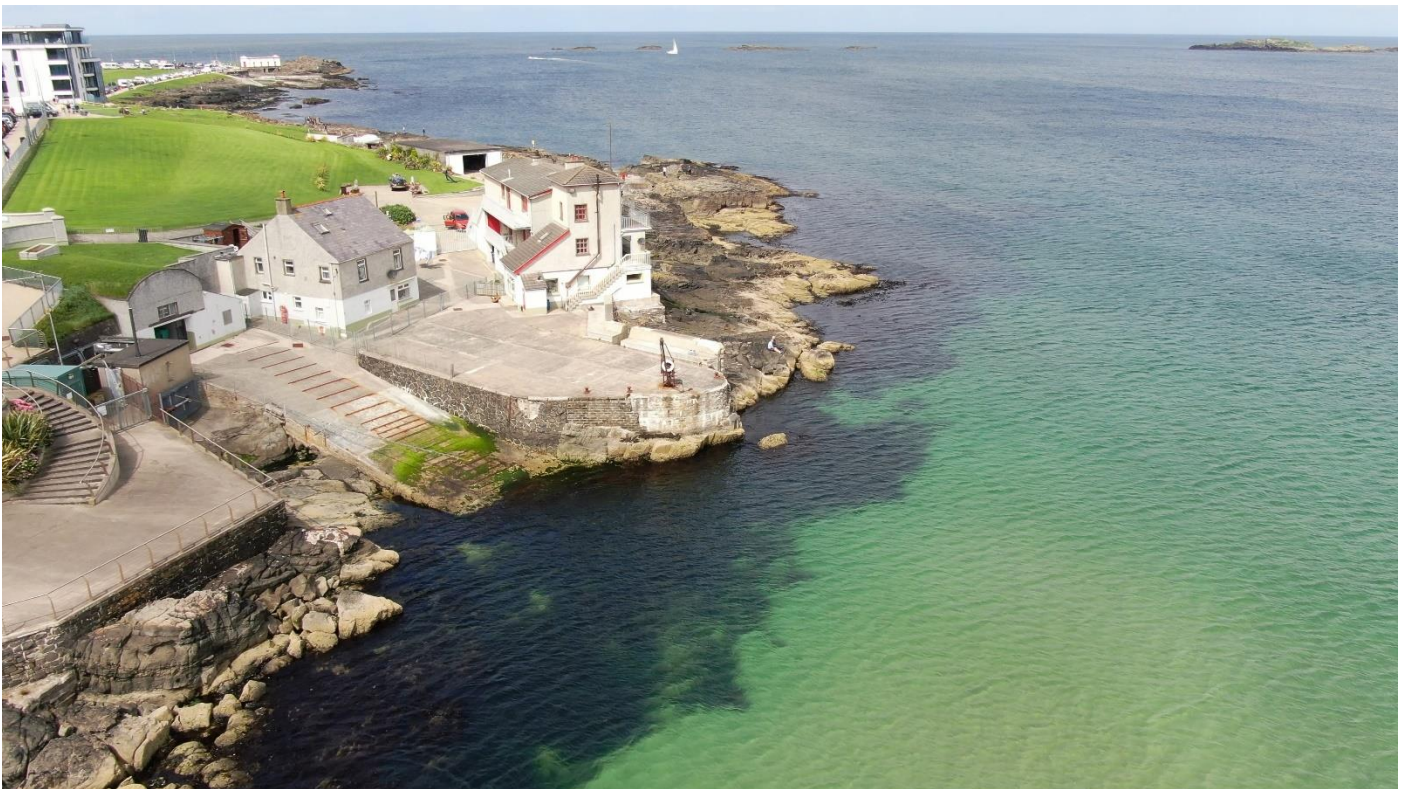


Rusting Relics of a bygone era by Dr Peter Wilson

Like all coastal towns Portrush displays clear evidence of its links with the sea. Through the ages the nature of these links has changed, but in places some of the hardware associated with former industry and commerce remains as testimony to those times in which things were done differently.

Salmon fishing was an important and controlled activity from at least 1630AD (although salmon had been an important source of food for the occupants of Mount Sandel some 8000-9000 years earlier). Surviving documents indicate that in the 1630sAD the Portrush salmon fishery was owned by the Earl of Antrim and was worth £20 per annum – no doubt a considerable sum in those years. In more recent times the rights to take salmon were leased by the Earldom to local fishermen and strict boundaries were set for each fishery.

Shoals of salmon returning across the Atlantic each year, to spawn in their river of birth, were easily caught in nets stretching out from the shore, to which they were securely fixed. The Portrush fishery at Portneen extended west from Dunluce Castle to Ballyreagh Castle and north to the Skerries. Beyond these limits anyone could take salmon.



Former Salmon Fishery at Portneen

In addition to the net at Portneen, three other nets existed nearby and were known as Skerry Bann, Big Duncan and Wee Duncan. No doubt there are stories behind these names. The nets extended



out to sea for about 275 metres and ended in a large bag or trap. Fishermen tended their nets from rowing boats but winches were needed to bring the nets with their haul of fish ashore.

Two winches remain today as reminders of those times. Both show the effects of severe corrosion as a consequence of contact with salt-water spray over many years. The first, at Portneen, stands on the quay and can be seen from the adjacent pedestrian walkway that links Bath Terrace with Craigvara.



Winch at the former Portneen salmon fishery.

The other, at Portandhu Harbour, can be inspected at close quarters. The cable drum, cogs and winding handle are all still in place. Unfortunately there is no manufacturer's name or date embossed on the frame.



Winch at Portandhu Harbour

The harbour branch line ran downhill for half a mile from Portrush station and was opened in 1866; eleven years after the railway had reached to town. The need for a branch line to the harbour is an indication of the quantities of materials then being exported and imported by sea. Steam engines took wagons as far as the harbour bridge from where cables were used to pull them across for loading and unloading their cargoes.



Railway bridge across the harbour pictured in 1970

The line was closed in 1949 but the bridge across the harbour remained in place for some years before being replaced in 1979 by the current footbridge. The line to the harbour was either lifted or lies buried beneath tarmac but at the harbour itself the lines are still present - embedded in concrete and slowly decaying as the rust eats them away. This is one of few places where it is possible to inspect lines of the 5' 3" gauge without fear of being run over by a train! Cars are a different matter.



Harbour-side railway line embedded in concrete

Our thanks to Peter for this most interesting article on 'Rusting relics of a bygone era'

1st May 2021